

**Exegesis of Romans 1 on Homosexuality**  
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Romans 1:26,27 is perhaps the most difficult passage in the Bible for pro-gay, revisionist theologians. Not only does it appear to condemn male homosexuality, but lesbianism as well. So too, revisionists cannot dismiss it as being part of the Old Testament Law, subsequently fulfilled in Christ. Nor can they write it off as part of a "vice list" which Paul may have borrowed and with which he may not have been in entire agreement. Taken at face value, in Romans 1 we find Paul's pronouncement that homosexuality is both shameful and unnatural. Before we examine the revisionist reactions to and interactions with the passage, however, we must turn to introductory matters.

It is useful to know that Paul had not planted the church in Rome. Although he knew some of the Roman Christians (see chapter 16), he did not have the intimate relationship with them that he had with the recipients of his other letters. Romans is the least occasional of his writings; that is, he is not answering questions or dealing with the specific problems of one of his congregations. Romans is also the most theological of his letters; in it we find the clearest and most complete outline of his understanding of the gospel. We might view it as a theological letter of introduction to the churches in the capital of the Gentile Empire to which he was the apostle. Certainly the Roman Christians who did not know Paul personally had heard of him. There is reason to think that Paul wanted the Romans to hear about him with his own words.

Given our focus on homosexuality, it is also good to remind ourselves that Paul was a Jew. He had been called by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles, but he never turned his back on his Jewish background. As a Jew, moreover a Pharisee, Paul took the Old Testament and its laws very seriously. For Paul, then, homosexuality was not an option. He would have looked to Gen. 1:26,27 & 2:18-25 for his basic understanding of human sexuality. God created humanity, male and female, in His image. When He recognized that it was not good for Adam to be alone, God created Eve as a suitable partner for him. Heterosexuality was God's plan from the beginning; no good Jew would think otherwise. The very wording of Lev. 18:22 & 20:13 indicates the primacy of heterosexuality. "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman...." Homosexuality must be described in heterosexual terms even to be prohibited.

Paul did not write Romans to the Jews though. In spite of scholarly disagreement over the composition of the church(es) in Rome (whether it was predominately Jewish or Gentile in make-up), it is clear that Paul wrote with both Jewish Christians and Gentiles in mind. And if it could be demonstrated that Paul wrote mainly, even exclusively, to Jewish Christians, it remains the case that he wrote also to a decidedly Gentile culture.

Unlike Hebrew culture, that of the Greco-Roman world recognized homosexuality. It is debated whether the Greco-Roman culture merely condoned, or openly accepted it (Greek culture may have been considerably more pro-gay than Roman culture). Also debated is the extent to which homosexuality had pervaded the Roman world. Still, it is true that pederasty had been institutionalized as part and parcel of the education of wealthy Greek and some Roman boys (women were for the most part uneducated). It is also true that Greek mythology was supportive of homosexuality (Greek gods, most notably Eros,

engaged in homosexual activity). Certainly prior to Paul's time, the Greco-Roman upper classes and intelligentsia considered homosexual love superior to its heterosexual counterpart.

Plato, the fourth-century B.C. Greek philosopher, is famous among other things for his depiction of homosexual love, again Eros, as heavenly and as having in comparison to heterosexuality "the robuster nature and a larger share of the mind" (Symposium, trans. W.R.M. Lamb). Shortly before his death, however, in *Laws*, Plato described homosexuality as unnatural and "something to be legislated as harmful to society" (De Young, "The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions Of Homosexual Behavior," *JETS* (31/4, Dec. 1988): 438.). It may be that Plato was never in favor of homoeroticism himself; the discussion of love in *Symposium* was between Socrates and a group of drinking companions after a dinner party. It is entirely possible that some of the speeches were satirical and that none tell us anything about Plato's own views. At the least we can say that the philosopher was well aware of Classical homosexual culture, at the most, that he also endorsed it during part of his career. In either event, by the first century, the time of Paul, some Roman moral philosophers were "questioning the merits of homosexuality" (Ibid., 436). Then as now, it took time for the conclusions and questions of philosophers to affect the lives of average people. It will suffice it to say, therefore, that homosexuality was a fact of life, however its merits were debated, in first-century Rome.

Paul, for whom homosexuality was almost inconceivable, was writing to Romans for whom it was entirely conceivable. It comes as no real surprise, in light of this, that Paul mentioned homosexuality as part of his indictment of sinful, idolatrous Gentile humanity.

## CONTEXT

After a brief introduction, Paul takes eight chapters to explain the Gospel and the revelation of God's righteousness. He begins in 1:18 with the need for the Gospel in the first place: God's wrath in response to human sin. In *Romans* one, Paul demonstrates that people in general (many scholars believe the Gentile in particular) are sinful. Having done so, Paul makes the case, in chapter two, that God is impartial, "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law" (2:12). Then he turns to the Jews and their fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the Law. Because the Jews turned the Law into a set of rules to be kept, and if kept to enable the Jew to beat God at His own game as it were, many missed the relationship God wanted to have with them. Their utter inability to keep His Law was meant to drive God's people, not to rework the Law so that it could be mastered, but to a relationship of dependence on His love and grace. Even if one is persuaded by the "new look on Paul," first-century Judaism was characterized by legalism.

Because pharisaical Judaism focused on performance rather than relationship, the Jews were guilty before God. The Gentiles were guilty; the Jews were guilty. Even though Paul firmly believed that there was still great advantage in being a Jew (3:1&2), he drew the conclusion, in chapter three, that both Jews and Gentiles were in sin and in desperate need of God's righteousness. The remedy for sin, according to Paul was and is God's sacrifice of His Son. To become righteous, both positionally (to be declared legally innocent by God = justification) and practically (to be progressively conformed to the

image of Christ = sanctification), we must accept this sacrifice by faith. Paul argues that righteousness has always come by faith. In chapter four he appeals both to Abraham and David, pillars of Judaism, as exemplars of righteousness by faith.

Turning to the benefits of being made righteous by faith, Paul spends the first part of chapter five dwelling on the positive. To underscore those benefits, Paul contrasts what is available to the heirs of Adam and those of Christ. Justification, as well as attendant peace with God, grace and hope are seen as being that much more positive when viewed in contradistinction to the sin and death that is humanity's inheritance in Adam. In chapter six Paul begins to address what our response to God's grace ought to be. That is, he turns from the topic of justification to the process of sanctification. He considers what being baptized into Christ should mean in our daily lives. Moving on in chapter seven, he deals with what it means to be united to Christ. If we are united to Christ we are no longer bound to or by the Law, and yet we struggle with and against it. Finally in chapter eight, Paul declares that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we are able to live, not according to sin, but according to the Spirit. God's Spirit lives within us effecting our transformation into the image of Christ. No matter how things look, or how bad they actually get, we are told that God is for us and that nothing will separate Him from us.

The wider context of Romans 1:26&27, then, is wide indeed. Paul has taken us from the notion of righteousness through a demonstration of our need for it, God's provision to meet that need and the way in which we appropriate His provision, all the way to its ultimate victory. And we haven't even mentioned chapters nine through sixteen! In terms of immediate context, of course, we find our passage in the section in which Paul is proving that people in general need what God has to offer.

People need to be made righteous by God because they have suppressed their knowledge of Him and chosen to worship that which is created instead of the Creator. Paul takes us all the way back to creation. Creation, what God has made, is testimony to His existence, moreover to the fact that He is worthy of worship. Yet, the crown of His creation, people made in His image have chosen not to worship Him. For this reason, God is justifiably angry. As a result of God's wrath, He gave humanity over to its own desires. He allowed us to make horrible choices and to live with their consequences. This brings us to 1:26&27, to homosexuality.

As Paul has taken us back to creation in general, now I think he intends us to consider humanity's creation in particular. Genesis 1:27 reads, "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; He created them male and female." The words for male and female in the Septuagint are the same words Paul uses for men and women in our passage in Romans. There are a few words for men and women in Greek. That Paul used terms that harken back to the creation account of Genesis one is significant I think. God's original intent for humanity was heterosexual complementarity. One effect of the fall of humankind into sin is homosexuality. It is no minor effect either. As we have seen, Paul paints the history of humanity and its need for righteousness in broad strokes. In a brief two chapters all of humanity is shown to be guilty. Why bring up homosexuality in so generalized a presentation of human history?

Idolatry seems to be the chief sin in Romans one. Humanity chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator. God apparently got fed up and said, "Fine, have it your way." He gave us over to our desires, desires for the creature rather than the creator, desires to fulfill our purposes rather than His. If God created us male and female for each other, what better way to thumb our noses at Him than to choose homosexuality? It bespeaks a fundamental rejection of God's lordship over His creation of Genesis one.

Very few of the people I know claim to have chosen homosexuality. I believe them; who of us chose to inherit the results of the fall? Because Paul covers so much history in so few paragraphs, he can be easily misconstrued. I think his point is that humanity, not individuals per se, chose homosexuality. Or to put it a different way, homosexuality is one of the more obvious results of God's decision to allow our refusal to acknowledge His purposes for creation to run its course. The existence of homosexuality to Paul, a Jew who was very clear on how God intended people to live, is indication that human society is utterly depraved. We were created for relationship with God and to worship Him; instead we hide from Him and worship what we think we understand and can control. God created male and female (the Greek words here view men and women as other, opposite, complementary) for each other; instead we relate to what is like, similar, the known rather than the unknown.

#### KEY WORDS

There are a number of words in Romans 1:26,27 which are worthy of comment. Alas, we will look at three. Perhaps because Paul paints the history of fallen humanity in such sweeping strokes, he chooses his colors, or words, very carefully. As was mentioned above, the words he chooses for men and women, male and female (arsenes and theleias) actually, are quite particular. The only other place Paul uses the terms is in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The reason for his choice in both instances, I think, is that Paul was after "polar opposites" (David E. Malick, "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (July-September 1993): 332). Clearly in Galatians Paul is dealing with opposites, and doing so to be inclusive. In Romans Paul's point is to reflect God's intent in creation. He takes his terminology from the Septuagint translation of Genesis 1:27. When God created humanity male and female, He created complementary opposites; that is, opposites intended to fit together.

It bears repeating that: there were other words for men and women available to Paul. The other words, however, had functional connotations. For example, the usual words for man and woman (aner and gyne) could also mean husband and wife. Instead of these, Paul went back to Genesis for gender-specific, function-neutral terminology. To get most clearly at what fallen humanity had done to their sexuality, Paul employed the very words used to describe the creation of pre-fallen humanity.

Turning from our brief treatment of male and female, we should go back to the beginning of verse 26. Paul says that "God gave them over to degrading passions..." Gave over, *paredoken*, occurs three times in Romans 1:18-32, the section in which the revelation of God's wrath against human sin is spelled out. Most commentators take this thrice-repeated "giving over" as a divine, judicial act. Romans "indicates that the punishment for sin was a handing over of mankind to sin" (*Ibid.*,334). There is debate, however,

as to how such a judicial act is to be viewed. Some understand "gave over" as permissive and that God "permitted men to fall into the retributive consequences of their infidelity and apostasy" (S. Lewis Johnson, "God Gave Them up: A Study in Divine Retribution," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (April-June 1972): 126). Others take the verb in a privative sense, "God deprived man ...He withdrew His hand that had restrained men from evil" (*Ibid.*, 127). The third view is punitive. Proponents of this view find in God's giving us over "a penal infliction of retribution" (*Ibid.*, 128).

Quite frankly, I don't see a material difference between the first two views. Nor do I agree with its champions that the third is the only one which makes sense of the fact that *paredoken* is an active verb. In view three, *paredoken* is active on two counts: first, the verb is active in form; second, the verb is active in meaning. That is, giving up requires conscious action on God's part. Where I do not dispute that *paredoken* is active in form, I don't think that permission and privation must be viewed as passive. When I give permission to my children or deprive them of something, my action or choice not to act can be quite deliberate. In one sense it doesn't really matter whether God permitted us to fall into retribution, or He inflicted retribution upon us; either way, His judgment stands, and we must face the consequences of sin. On the other hand, it matters a great deal; it matters how we see God in His judgment. Did God give us over to our own desires and their logical consequences? Did He say in effect, "I choose to let you have your own way; what you get is what you deserve."? Or did He calculatedly intensify human lust as a punishment for sin? Whether you are a Calvinist or an Arminian will have a great deal to do with your answer to the questions. I find myself saying, "yes," to the first question. I believe that God has chosen to punish us, if you will, by allowing us to reap the consequences of our free choice to worship ourselves rather than Him.

The word in the passage that has received the most attention recently is *nature*, *physis*. Women, according to our passage, exchanged the natural function (a sexual term) for that which is contrary to nature, likewise the men left the natural and burned in their desire for one another. If one is reading an English Bible, the text could be construed to have nothing to do with the homosexual lifestyle at all. One might say, "I have always been attracted to men; I did not exchange heterosexuality for homosexuality; it is natural for me to be gay." John Boswell, in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980), made the same case from the Greek New Testament. Unfortunately, however compelling the argument may be in English, it has little lexical merit. In other words, the Greek word for nature doesn't have the same range of meaning as the English term. In Boswell's defense, he was an historian, not a New Testament exegete. Still, he is in part responsible for popularizing an interpretation which has encouraged homosexuals and lesbians to reject Romans one as irrelevant to them. Though Boswell's view of nature is not shared even by many revisionist exegetes, it is popular in non-scholarly circles. It can be found, in short form, in a Metropolitan Community Church pamphlet, "Homosexuality: not a sin, not a sickness."

James B. De Young has written a thorough, if not exhaustive, word study on physis. In it he states that the term's range of meaning is:

(1) origin, including birth and growth; (2) the natural form or constitution of a person, animal or thing, including nature or character of a person; (3) the regular order of nature; (4) philosophically, nature as an originating power, Nature personified, elementary substance, the concrete idea of creation; (5) creature or mankind; (6) kind, sort, species; (7) sex; and (8) approximately equal to law (J. De Young, "The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans and its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior," JETS 31/4 (December 1988): 430).

As De Young notes, the closest we can get to Boswell's definition is in (2) above. "Yet this usage is never associated with homosexuality. It points to what results from origin or growth and includes the instincts of animals" (Ibid.). When homosexuality is discussed in the Greek of Paul's day and before, it is in terms of category (3). In much Greek thought what is natural is that which ought to be, so the regular order of nature is what ought to be. Paul, in fact, borrows a phrase from Greek moral philosophy, *para physin*, contrary to nature. Greek ethicists, especially Stoics, classified acts etc. as either according to nature (*kata physin*), or contrary to it (*para physin*). Plato condemns pederasty as contrary to nature, one of Plutarch's characters calls homosexual union unnatural (Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (Spring 1986): 193). Philo and Josephus, roughly Paul's contemporaries, both regarded homosexuality as contrary to nature. The phraseology is what is key here, not the opinion of homosexuality. It was current in Paul's day to make moral judgments using the labels, "according to" or "contrary to" nature.

As we have said, Paul picked up a stock phrase from the ethical debates of his era. His readers would have understood his usage plainly enough (usage which, by the way, differs from that in I Cor. 11:14, where *physis* is the subject of the sentence, not the object of a preposition). And by closely paralleling the language of creation, Paul was able to add to the Greek notion of nature. Perhaps Paul was aware of Philo's having combined "the Greek (Stoic) concept of nature with the Jewish (OT) understanding of God and the law" (De Young, 434). Even if he were not, Paul pushes the ideas of what is according to nature and contrary thereto all the way back to God. What is natural, is not merely that which corresponds to the general order of nature without reference to a creator, but it is what God intended in creation. This I get from the context, not from the use of *physis* per se (nature is a Greek concept, one with no particular need of a god, and not a Jewish one - the Jews did not have to appeal to nature, they could appeal to its Creator). What is natural, then, in the final analysis, is not what comes naturally to fallen humanity, but that for which humanity was originally created. What is natural is humanity, created in God's image as male and female for each other.

## CONCLUSION

Having taken a few pages to look at Romans one, we are faced with the all-important question: so what? What impact should Paul's treatment of the history of the fall of humanity have on us today? As was noted in the context study, our passage is found in the section of the book in which Paul makes the case

that all are sinners and in need of God's righteousness. He brings up homosexuality, it would seem, to highlight the difference between God's intent for humanity and our own. Homosexuality is a human creation, something we "discovered" after God had given us over to our own desires.

Because Paul is offering us his view of history, he does not proscribe homosexuality in so many words. There are no imperatives in our passage; more to the point, there are no prohibitions. Still, his opinion of homosexuality is clear. Paul says that fallen humans, although professing to be wise, became fools (1:22). He introduces his consideration of homosexuality per se with, "For they exchanged the truth of God for the lie ... For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions" (1:25a & 26a). For Paul homosexuality is proof that humanity, left to its own devices, will produce sin upon sin.

If we hold to the authority and inspiration of Paul's writings, his view of history should be ours as well. I am convinced that homosexuality is not part of God's intent for human sexuality. As a result of the fall, it needs to be fought. An application of Romans one, then, is that we affirm Paul's understanding of history. We admit that homosexuality is our own creation, a foolish and degrading one. Then I think we must move on to other parts of Scripture to learn how to deal with homosexuality in our midst. It is certainly not enough to agree with Paul's historical assessment. If we apply only Romans One, we run the risk of becoming name-calling legalists. We must move on, as Paul himself does later in the book, to the remedy for sin, to Jesus Christ.

When we look at Jesus, the company (mostly bad) He kept, the life-style He led, I hope we move beyond name-calling to love. When we look at Jesus, when He is our primary focus, His indwelling Spirit enables us to affirm the truth of Paul's harsh words in love. There are very few people who can say that homosexuality is foolish and degrading in a loving manner. But this must be our goal. Without love, truth is a club -- hard and cruel; without truth, love is reduced to mere permissiveness. Real love, God's love, will always tell the truth.

Though I don't think I have mentioned love much, if at all, in this article, it is clearly foundational. In surveying those biblical passages that deal with homosexuality, my intent is to help us all to be better equipped to tell the truth in love. Because I have been doing more with the truth side of things, I wanted to take some time to hope on paper that we are all working on the love side as well. Truth is easier to teach than love, but I do know that all that I have written amounts to so much dung if dispensed without love.

Pro-gay, revisionist theology is not terribly compelling to a conservative exegete like myself. At the intellectual level, most pro-gay arguments are easily dispatched. The truth of pertinent passages seems remarkably clear to me. The reason that I take far more time with certain arguments than I think they deserve comes down to love (Christ's, not mine). I am fully capable of wielding the truth of Paul's assessment of history like a sharp object. There lurks in my heart a name-calling legalist. So I continue to read, to evaluate, to write, because I want to tell the truth in love.

I have often called revisionist theology a theology of desperation. It is a desperation which has over the years come to elicit compassion rather than derision from me. In revisionist theology I find a cry for acceptance from God. Sometimes it is a demand rather than a cry; sometimes it seems less than

genuine. Nevertheless what lies at the core of all honest, revisionist theology is a desire to be acceptable. This is a desire I must respect -- this is a desire I share for that matter. Unless we have already rejected Him (and some of us even after rejecting Him) we all want to be acceptable to God. If we believe we were born homosexual, it is only natural that we would wish to be found acceptable as homosexual. I may be wrong, but I think we must extend love and acceptance to our fellow sinners before the truth can have any real impact.

God accepts me just as I am. He knows me and my filthy heart completely, He knows parts of me I am still too scared to look at, and yet He loves me. This is where repentance and change come from. I am moved to real change, as opposed to better performance, not to meet some external standard, not to jump through a hoop, but in response to the overwhelming love and grace of God. So homosexuality is a sin; so what? As far as I am concerned, we never deny that fact as we seek to love and accept homosexuals just as they are. If we overlook the basic sinfulness of homosexuality, we find ourselves right back in Romans One, worshipping the creature rather than the creator. Yet if we choose to give God His proper place and worship Him, becoming cold-hearted legalists is not an option. Legalism, though perhaps more insidious, is just another form of creature worship. If we would worship God, we would love Him; if we would love Him, we would love both His Law and our fellow creatures as He does. Permissiveness and legalism are equal and opposite perversions; our task is to avoid both and walk the narrow, difficult road of truth-telling love. Our only model is Jesus; we will fall off our narrow path into either legalism or permissiveness, if our focus is not on Him.